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COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

Thirteenth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 252nd MEETING

Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Tuesday, 1 February 1994 at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. CORTI

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The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

WAYS AND MEANS OF EXPEDITING THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN (continued)

1. Ms. SCHOPP-SCHILLING said that the servicing of the Committee needed to be improved, in which connection Working Group I had formulated a number of recommendations. The Chairperson should seek a meeting at the highest level to explain the Committee's difficulties, since it was not possible to continue under the current circumstances. It might be appropriate to prepare a written report pointing out that while women could accomplish a great deal there were limits and the Committee was overstretched.

2. Ms. ILIC agreed that the Committee operated under a considerable burden, to such an extent that it was becoming impossible for it to give proper consideration to reports of States parties. It had also become quite impossible for any member to participate fully in the work of the Committee and the working groups. The support provided by the Secretariat was simply inadequate, and individual members had felt constrained to make use of outside assistance, a situation that was not tenable.

3. The Committee, in addition to its consideration of reports of States parties, had a number of other issues that required its attention, for example, amendment of the rules of procedure, which no longer reflected the reality of the Committee's work in all circumstances. Further, there was an obvious need for future members of the Committee to receive guidance before they assumed their functions, in which connection they should be asked to indicate a preference in terms of preparing studies on specific articles of the Convention. Much of the Committee's work could, in fact, be done in advance of sessions.

4. Ms. BUSTELO endorsed the views of the previous speakers. The Committee's work was increasing, and more resources, including more time for meetings, were required. The Chairperson and the Bureau might wish to meet with the Secretary-General and other senior officials to discuss the number of reports that the Committee was being asked to consider in comparison with the numbers processed by other human rights bodies. It should be borne in mind that since the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights the importance of the Committee's work had increased. In such a context of increased workload, members of the Committee felt that the Secretariat had not been able to provide appropriate support when needed. It was thus important to make it very clear what the Committee's needs were and to determine how they could be met. With current levels of technology it seemed curious, for example, that the Committee had no computer or photocopying facilities in the conference room. The Committee also needed to know how many Secretariat staff were available to it. In the final analysis, if the United Nations system could not provide the necessary support the Committee would need to rethink its procedures.

5. Ms. TALLAWY said that the Committee could not continue to consider reports at the current pace given its other tasks, including completion of the interpretation of the articles of the Convention and of the Committee's guidelines for the preparation of reports. The Committee should, for example, indicate that later reports needed to reflect newer developments in States

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parties, such as the involvement of non-governmental organizations. It was also important to increase awareness of the Committee's work and to make use of the United Nations system to assist Governments in appropriate follow-up measures. The Committee might, for example, benefit from the preparations for the World Summit for Social Development, which would focus heavily on women's issues.

6. The Committee should take account of such considerations in devising its agenda for its next session, and might wish to spend time at the beginning of that session considering organizational matters. On Secretariat support, it was important for the Committee to make it clear what its workload was and what was needed.

7. Ms. NIKOLAEVA said that the main issue was to ensure that the Committee could carry out its work and build on the successes it had already achieved. She agreed that the services provided to the Committee were inadequate, as exemplified by delays in the processing of documents for translation and the late issuance of documents, which were required in all languages. The Committee had, for example, received reports during the session which there had been no time to study. It was important for documents to be translated and made available to members in good time, before the start of the session.

8. There was a need to ensure a fair distribution of the Committee's workload among members. She agreed that new members should be briefed in advance so that they could enter fully into the Committee's work immediately on assumption of their functions. The Committee should also consider the manner in which it worked, and could look at the possibility of requesting reports on specific areas of interest, such as education, or on particular articles of the Convention. Perhaps specific proposals could be prepared before the next session. She agreed with the previous speakers regarding the inadequacy of the services available to the Committee. Specifically, the secretariat must be strengthened and members must know who they could contact in connection with particular issues. She urged the Chairperson to speak to the Secretary-General concerning the Committee's grievances as quickly as possible.

9. Ms. UKEJE said that, on joining the Committee, new members should be informed of its unwritten traditions and rules to enable them to participate effectively. In order to maintain consistency in the Committee's actions, a fact sheet or manual of procedures should be distributed. In the short term, a closed orientation meeting for new members should be held at the beginning of each session. The work of the pre-session working groups must also be rationalized.

10. Ms. CARTWRIGHT said that the Committee's workload was too heavy. Therefore, because of the backlog of reports from States parties and the preparation required for its participation in forthcoming international conferences, it should pursue its work on the analysis of individual articles of the Convention and recommendations only as time permitted.

11. The amount and quality of secretariat support could be improved in several ways. Professional support and technical and legal advice were required for many of the papers that Committee members were asked to draft, but were not currently provided by the secretariat. Vacancies in the secretariat should be

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filled as soon as possible, and should be open to both internal and external candidates. It might be useful for the Committee to be consulted regarding candidates. Secretariat priorities should be the preparation of international meetings and conferences, communications with Committee members and provision of services at Committee sessions. Additional clerical assistance was also essential. An explanation of the system for processing translation of documents would be welcome, as, to her knowledge, none had been produced within the 48-hour time-limit at the current session.

12. Ms. GARCIA-PRINCE expressed her appreciation for the enormous efforts made by the secretariat to meet the needs of the Committee. She agreed that the problem of lack of secretariat services should be addressed at the highest level. It must be made clear that the Committee's orientation had evolved over the past several years. Originally, its focus had been examining reports from States parties and making recommendations based on those reports. Gradually, however, the work of the Committee had become a point of reference for all areas of women's affairs and had taken on political importance. The Committee was being asked to provide input into all the major world conferences. It had made a major contribution to the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, and would participate actively in the World Summit for Social Development and the International Conference on Population and Development, not to mention the Fourth World Conference on Women.

13. Because of that new mandate, more time and secretariat support were needed to prepare for participation in such events. Thus, the Committee required some type of permanent structure in order to meet its operational needs. It often recommended that States parties should ask the United Nations for assistance in preparing their reports; likewise, the Committee should request help from the Division for the Advancement of Women in preparing its sessions and its participation in conferences. Personal contacts among members between sessions were very important, but were insufficient to the breadth of the tasks facing the Committee.

14. Ms. QUINTOS-DELES suggested that the inter-sessional periods could be used for the preparation of meetings in order to save time. A series of regional meetings for preparatory work might actually result in cost savings. Furthermore, an official international body should have the latest technology at its disposal, and electronic mail might help to streamline the preparatory process.

15. Questions from the Committee concerning second and subsequent periodic reports could be categorized into two groups, requests for further information or clarification and analytical questions on policies. Written responses only to the first group of questions would allow more time for dialogue on the second group.

16. The Committee could also summarize its findings on particular areas of the implementation of the Convention and summarize its recommendations. That summary should note positive results in certain areas, and indicate what the Committee had learned through the examination of reports.

17. Ms. SINEGEORGIS proposed that the secretariat should prepare a note on the current discussion and transmit it to the head of the Division for the Advancement of Women. The Chairperson should also meet with the Secretary-General and outline the difficulties the Committee faced. In addition, members of the Committee should be provided with a written explanation of the secretariat structure.

18. The independence of the Committee as a treaty body must be respected by providing it with proper support services and staffing, and finding it a permanent home. Until its secretariat was strengthened, it should not take on any additional work.

19. Ms. BRAVO de RAMSEY said that the nature of the translation and interpretation services provided to the Committee placed members who were not fluent in more than one official language at a disadvantage, which had a substantive effect on the Committee's work since all members were not able to contribute to the same degree. All official languages of the United Nations should be employed in the Committee. Some important documents had not yet been translated into Spanish, for example, which limited her ability to contribute. She supported the suggestion that an orientation session should be held for new members.

20. Ms. ABAKA agreed with Ms. Ilic that new members could be asked to express interest in specific articles of the Convention and could also volunteer to review certain initial reports and prepare briefings on them for other members of the Committee before the beginning of the session. She agreed with Ms. Cartwright that the Committee should devote more time to the preparation of its participation in major conferences.

21. Ms. AOUIJ agreed that when she met with the Secretary-General, the Chairperson should have at her disposal a written note outlining the needs of the Committee. The results of that meeting - if the Committee's suggestions were followed and it was provided with the necessary human and financial resources - would show the Committee whether it was viewed as essential to the well-being of women throughout the world. The work of the Committee had moved from the consideration of reports only to the establishment of basic jurisprudence on articles of the Convention. The Secretary-General should be made aware that the Committee had adapted its role to follow the changing currents of history.

22. Ms. SCHOPP-SCHILLING asked when the secretariat could provide members of the Committee with copies of the discussions in writing, and whether the summary records of the current session would be available by the end of the session.

23. Mr. MATHIASON (Deputy Director, Division for the Advancement of Women) said that with regard to the summary records, he would conduct inquiries to see whether they could be ready in some languages.

24. The CHAIRPERSON said that the proposal of a one-day briefing session for new members was important to the future work of the Committee. She hoped that at the next session, less emphasis would be placed on the consideration of reports. She had done her utmost to ensure that, in conformity with the decisions taken at the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, the Committee

(The Chairperson)

would be put on the same footing as other human rights treaty bodies. The Committee would have to sustain that effort. The world was changing and the main thrust of major world conferences was now shifting to women's issues. In that connection, the proposed changes in the rules of procedure were designed to put more emphasis on the new political role the Committee must play in the world.

25. Concerning secretariat support, she agreed with Ms. Cartwright's proposal that the Committee should be consulted regarding candidates for vacant posts. The Committee should also identify someone to monitor events in New York, keep the Chairperson and other members of the Committee informed, and consult with them.

26. Turning to the translation services, she noted that they had rejected some badly drafted documents which had been submitted for translation. More cooperation and understanding from those services would help to ease the Committee's workload, as certain members were handicapped by the fact that they had to work in a language that was not their mother tongue. She had also noticed that the Division for the Advancement of Women was using relatively old technology which made its work cumbersome.

27. Ms. MONGELLA (Secretary-General, Fourth World Conference on Women) welcomed the constructive suggestions and comments made by members of the Committee. The inadequate servicing of the Committee had been caused in part by initial logistical difficulties encountered by the Division for the Advancement of Women following its move to Headquarters. However, the problem was not an isolated one, but was encountered by all institutions serving women all over the world. In that connection, the issue of institutional arrangements for the Committee would be considered at the World Conference on Women, and would also provide an opportunity for raising the question of the lack of resources for bodies which dealt with women's issues. It was important to establish a link between the Committee and the Centre for Human Rights, and she had been holding discussions on the establishment of a formal mechanism to that end, so as to bring women's issues into the mainstream and give the Committee both credibility and visibility.

28. With regard to the servicing of the Committee's meetings, the Division did not have a unit specifically devoted to the work of the Committee because it was so woefully understaffed. To strengthen the Committee, such a unit must be created to focus, on a continuing basis, on human rights issues and other issues relating to the Committee's work. The facilitating of permanent contact among Committee members, the Chairperson and the Division for the Advancement of Women was difficult, because the Division was underfunded.

29. The problem of translation was perhaps caused by the fact that so many other meetings were taking place in New York that the translation services were stretched to the limit. It could also be due to the understaffing of the Division for the Advancement of Women. Stronger servicing of the Committee might enable drafts to be prepared in time for submission for translation. The age of the equipment being used by the Division was related to the question of allocation of resources. The Division used what was available. She would

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report to the Committee at its next session on follow-up action to deal with the issues raised.

30. At the invitation of the Chairperson, Ms. Gamble-Payne (Chief, Child Rights Section, Division of Public Affairs, United Nations Children's Fund) took a place at the Committee table.

31. Ms. GAMBLE-PAYNE (Chief, Child Rights Section, Division of Public Affairs, United Nations Children's Fund), speaking on behalf of the Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), said that UNICEF welcomed the widespread acceptance of the Convention as a victory for women everywhere and as a harbinger of true equality and empowerment. The Convention complemented and was complemented by the Convention on the Rights of the Child: both were rooted in a common vision, that of a family in which both parents, working in partnership, created a supportive environment in which boys and girls could grow up to realize their full potential. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which had now been ratified by 154 countries, might be the first United Nations convention to become law in every country in the world. It guaranteed every boy and girl the same access to health care, education and nutrition, as well as freedom of expression and freedom from abuse and exploitation.

32. However, until equal protection under the law was ensured for women, the rights of all children could not be ensured, since more than half of the world's children were girls and discrimination against women began at or before birth. The needs of children would not be fully met, and the gains already made could not be sustained, without a substantial and permanent improvement in the status of women. In its recent report entitled The State of the World's Children, UNICEF had urged Governments throughout the world, including the United States Government, to reaffirm their commitment to the rights of both children and women.

33. Governments had come to understand that all development issues, including health, education and the environment, were part of the same problem, requiring the same solution. In view of that new integrated approach to improving the lives of families throughout the world, it would be short-sighted to compel anyone to choose between the rights of women and the rights of children. Rather, both causes should be promoted within the international community. UNICEF had recently issued an executive order to all of its field offices, urging them to promote the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in countries where it had not yet been ratified, and to join in the effort to ensure effective implementation of the Convention in countries where it had been ratified. UNICEF also looked forward to exploring with the Committee the feasibility of joint field visits for the purpose of monitoring and promoting both conventions throughout the world. UNICEF would provide liaison between the Committee and the Committee on the Rights of the Child, so that helpful information could be shared and exchanged and specific strategies developed for better monitoring of the situation of the girl child, in particular.

34. UNICEF had pledged to support the Fourth World Conference on Women by collaborating with Governments and non-governmental organizations to mobilize

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international support for the Conference and to plan effective strategies at the national, regional and corporate levels. Lastly, UNICEF would continue to press the countries represented at the recent World Conference on Human Rights to honour their commitments to both conventions and to the notion of guaranteed and equal rights for all children and women.

35. Ms. Gamble-Payne withdrew.

IMPLEMENTATION OF ARTICLE 21 OF THE CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN (continued)

36. The CHAIRPERSON drew attention to document CEDAW/C/1994/WG.II/WP.2/Rev.1, containing a revised draft general recommendation on articles 9, 15 and 16 of the Convention prepared by Ms. Cartwright, the Rapporteur of Working Group II. She invited the members of the Committee to adopt that recommendation.

37. Ms. SCHOPP-SCHILLING requested clarification as to why the Committee was considering a revised version of the draft general recommendation.

38. Ms. CARTWRIGHT said that the first version (CEDAW/C/1994/WG.II/WP.2) contained the edited text of the draft general recommendation whose substance had been adopted at the end of the previous session. At that time, it had been agreed that three additions would be included in the final edited draft (A/48/38, para. 640). Those additions had since been included. As the first version had appeared to her to be too long and repetitive to serve the purposes for which it had been intended, she had, following consultations with the Chairperson, prepared a revised version which was shorter and easier to read, but which included all the ideas contained in the original document.

39. Ms. GARCIA-PRINCE said that the document which was before the members of the Committee was completely different, in both style and substance, from the text which the Committee had considered previously. She failed to understand how the members of the Committee could chose between the two texts, as they had only had an opportunity to make comments on the previous version. If a choice was to be made, she would prefer the earlier version, as the recommendations which it contained were far more specific.

40. The CHAIRPERSON recalled that, as she had stated at the beginning of the session, the Committee had no choice but to approve the revised text without further substantive changes. That was the agreement reached at the previous session and referred to in the Committee's report (A/48/38, para. 640). If the Committee did not wish to adopt the revised text, which incorporated all the ideas contained in the previous version, then it must adopt the text originally drafted.

41. Ms. SINEGEORGIS suggested that, as the second version appeared to be an abridgement of the original text, the Committee could be given time to study it and could adopt it at a later meeting.

42. Ms. SCHOPP-SCHILLING said that, while she agreed that the first version was repetitive, she believed that it contained more explicit recommendations. The more specific the recommendations were, the easier it would be for States parties to understand and implement them.

43. Ms. BUSTELO said that, in order to prepare a shorter and better text, it had been necessary to delete some elements. In the new version, the recommendations had been drafted more concisely, using more formal language, but all the basic ideas had been included. In order to verify that, the Committee should be given time to study the document.

44. The CHAIRPERSON suggested that the matter should be deferred to a later meeting.

The meeting rose at 1.20 p.m.